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An Introduction

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An Introduction

by John Zarobell

You are greeted outside by a warhorse fairly dancing across the building. The first image you see inside is an impossible floating city of twisted skyscrapers and castle turrets kept aloft by a feeble propeller and a couple flocks of birds. Though the trees have been hacked to stumps, there is some impossible hope. This is the domain of Andrew Schoultz.

If all this sounds fantastic, it reflects contemporary crises of a political, economic, and ecological nature that the artist is deeply committed to exploring through his symbolic visual language. It is not long before a viewer will find herself face-to-face with the business end of a cannon, one that has fired splatters of gold leaf that cover American flags stretched as supports for paintings on the surrounding walls. Just beyond, the arrows rain down both in the pictures and in a gallery housing a panoramic mural installation. Is this an attack on the colony of art or an insurgency against kneejerk patriotism?

A little art history will actually help to open the contemporary political implications in this case. The old masters considered history painting the highest form of artistic expression. By bringing ancient or biblical history to life through large-scale works, artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael decorated the grand public spaces of Rome and Florence. In the 19th century, Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault made colossal paintings to decorate the walls of the first museum, the Louvre. Something unprecedented happened in 1819, when Géricault created the *Raft of the Medusa*. He not only made a huge painting featuring contemporary history, but also presented a vivid recreation of a tragic episode involving the French navy and its inglorious involvement in the colony of Senegal. By doing so, Géricault's work endowed history painting with contemporary currency.

As with the Géricault, the currency of Schoultz's work emerges from its relationship to key issues of our own era, the kinds of topical concerns that drive a cottage industry of cable news and talk radio, to say nothing of the blogosphere. Thinking about actual currency, there are two points to consider: it circulates and it contains images. Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People*, a history painting made

to commemorate the revolution of 1830, was shunned in its own era, but later became a national image when the French put it on the 100 franc note. Schoultz works this process in reverse, taking paper currency, cutting it up, and employing it in his work as a collage element. On the delicate shapes he manipulates, one can see the pieces of an image, but national and numeric symbols have lost their original meanings. Their monetary value, now irrelevant, is converted in Schoultz's work to symbolic value. These pieces of money may no longer be worth the paper they are printed on, but the fragments shore up the political dimension of Schoultz's art by demonstrating the volatility of value in today's world and the endlessly shifting nature of our collective experience.

Our mutual understanding of value carried by abstract symbols (\$, €, £ . . .) and the fact that we share experiences that result from universal value bind us all together. Schoultz's work investigates this symbolic currency as an aspect of our public lives. Whether in the gallery or the street, the murals Schoultz produces bring us up against the recognition of our situatedness, the fact of our being somewhere and having the experiences we have. One could call this politics, but public is the word that seems most fitting because public space is what we occupy together and cannot control. In one way, Schoultz has made the Monterey Museum his own. Looked at another way, he has revealed—in a most delightful, capricious, and irreverent manner—what our public space looks like today. Perhaps this will guide us, like Delacroix's *Liberty*, to engage in public life more completely.